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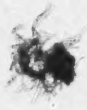
ABSTRACT

There is an abundance of educational software available, the quality of which ranges from invaluable to a waste of money. The following guidelines should make shopping for software as painless as possible: (1) know your objectives; (2) be sure the software fits your equipment; (3) consider dealer support; (4) consider brand names first; (5) check the evaluations; (6) find out if you can make copies; and (7) keep in mind the capabilities of your students. After you have purchased your software, make backup copies (if possible), teach your students how to take care of the software, and check all copies periodically. Word processing can be a useful tool in English classes, not only as an instructional tool but as a piece of equipment as well. When purchasing a word processing program, follow the general guidelines for software selection. (DC)



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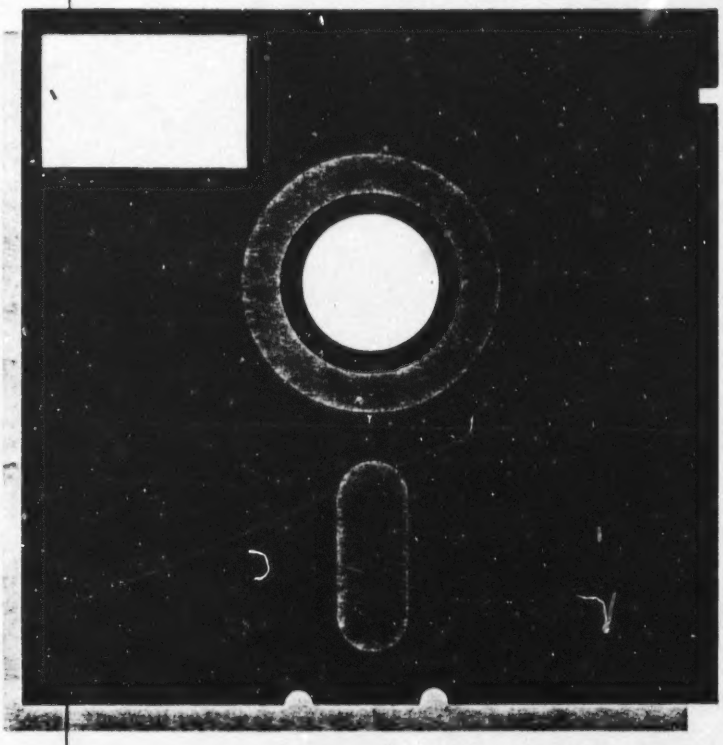
A GUIDE TO SELECTING EDUCATIONAL SOFTWARE



By C. Bruce Hunter

Educational Software!

It's all over the place. Your mail is full of information about new, indispensible programs. Your computer-minded colleagues, when they avert their eyes from the screen, mention that you're got to investigate THIS program. Directories of educational software are appearing. Will directories of the directories be far behind?

Selecting and purchasing software is a demanding task—and the choices continue to expand. Selecting software for the classroom need not be intimidating. The process is quite straightforward—if it's done systematically.

The first step is simple—find out what's available. Begin by reading the "catalogs" stocked by computer stores and bookstores. Among these are such useful volumes as *LIST/The Software Resource Book for Personal Computer Users* (Redgate Publishing Company, periodical, $12.50), *The Book of Apple Software* (The Book Company, $19.95), and *The Book of Atari Software* (The Book Company, $19.95). And, watch for the November issue of *Media & Methods*, which will feature a detailed listing of computer-related books.

These volumes vary in their utility for teachers. In general, they list at least some of the available software, with descriptions, prices, and evaluations. Although they won't do your shopping for you, they are a starting point. Together with catalogs from school supply companies and publishers, which should already be circulating around your school, the literature provides a laundry list from which to choose. Still, the vast number of programs on the market makes *careful* selection a must.

Choices range from classroom "games" to instructional programs to such home-oriented software as Micro Lab's *SAT*, one of the many programs designed to prepare students to take standardized tests. There are even housekeeping packages to help teachers keep track of attendance and grades.

Naturally, these programs vary considerably. Some may prove invaluable in your classroom; others may be a waste of money. Shopping for educational software is nothing more or less than locating the programs you can use—and bypassing all the rest. Here are a few suggestions to make your shopping as painless as possible. ▶

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1. Know your objectives. Don't shop with a "that looks good" attitude. Software is too critical to select haphazardly. (In fact, it is so critical that many pros suggest buying the software first, then finding a computer to fit it.)

As you are well aware, there are literally hundreds of pieces of educational software to choose from. Some are good; others lack merit in various respects. Each program has its own capabilities and limitations. There are subtle differences that may not be apparent without examination but that can make a big difference in how well the programs work for you.

The only good way to get through the maze is to decide at the beginning what you want to accomplish, that is, know your objectives. Then shop for software that does *that* precise job. You may modify your goals during the process, but merely having clearly defined objectives in the first place will save time and frustration.

2. Be sure the software fits your equipment. Programs are designed to be compatible with specific computers. If you order a program designed for Apple, it probably won't function on your IBM. Check the advertisements and the catalogs or ask the salespeople to be sure you are getting something you can use. Many programs are sold in several versions to accommodate a variety of computers. You'll have to know which version you need.

Correlary: Check with the manufacturer of your machine. Most manufacturers now supply or recommend software especially tailored for their equipment. If any of this material fits your needs, you can be sure that it will be compatible with your equipment and will need a minimum of set up.

3. Consider support. You can save money by buying from "discount" mail order firms. But these firms can't give you local support which, depending on your experience, may be important. Software needs to be "set up" or "configured." This simply means that you make modifications to the program so that it will "run" on your system. Sometimes configuring is a very simple process. Occasionally it is complicated.

Friends or colleagues who know about computers can help set up your software. Otherwise, being able to call on a local dealer is a real plus. You may pay more for this support, but if you don't know much about computers, local support will save gray hairs and needless pain.

If you do buy via mail order, check the ads to see how much setup is needed. And if you buy locally, find out if the dealer you use can and will provide the help you need.

4. Consider "brand names" first. Currently, hundreds of firms sell computers and related materials. Some of them will not be in business next year. When you buy from an established firm, you can anticipate that they will probably still be around when and if you need help. Although software rarely needs follow-up support, it's nice to know that the manufacturer will be there.

In addition, reputable manufacturers often offer updated versions to software owners at discount prices. These items may not be important to you especially in the beginning, but they are a plus you will almost certainly lose if a manufacturer goes out of business.

There is a caution to this tip, however. Don't decide not to buy a program that really meets your objectives simply because you haven't heard of the manufacturer. Once upon a time, no one had heard of IBM. Just be cautious and circumspect when dealing with smaller and newer firms.

5. Check the evaluations. Most professional magazines now review software. (See *Media & Methods* reviews on page 18.) And the proliferating number of computer-related books give detailed information about a few of the most important and useful programs. (Although these books are intended for after-the-sale use, they will tell you a great deal about how useful a particular piece of software is.) However, it is important to recognize the difference between a sales pitch and an independent evaluation. Materials written by manufacturers and distributors are designed to look objective—but obviously aren't.

Of course, all reviews are subjective. As a reviewer myself, I can attest to this. It is possible that a program that everyone pans may be perfect for you. So check out any program that really appeals to you. But also find out what the professional reviewers say about a program before you buy. As a rule, professional reviewers are more objective than the manufacturer's advertising materials. This research will alert you to shortcomings that salespeople and ads might forget to mention.

Other good sources of information are user's manuals. Larger computer stores will have copies of these manuals for customers' inspection. Demonstration copies of the actual software also may be available. If you think a program is right for you, examining the manual or seeing the program in action will answer many of your questions.

6. *Pay close attention. This one's important.* Before buying any software, find out if you can make copies. Some software is "copy protected," which means that it is physically impossible to make duplicate copies of it. Since floppy disks and cassettes are easily damaged, this prohibition can be a drawback for classroom users. If you or a student accidentally ruins your only copy of a program, replacing it will involve inconvenience and additional cost. Obviously, you're better off if you can make working copies and lock up the original. (More on this later.)

Some programs can be copied but are subject to licensing agreements that may require you to pay extra for each copy you make. These agreements can be complicated and may include restrictions you'd rather not bother with. So, it's a good idea to read all licensing agreements before you buy. The best agreements allow you to make all the copies you need for your own use—as long as you don't sell or give them away.

7. Don't forget your students. A program may work fine in the computer store, and you may understand the instructions perfectly—which doesn't mean that your students can handle it. Examine the material from the point of view of your least talented student. If this perspective makes the program seem insurmountable, think twice before bringing it into your classroom.

Once you've considered all these points, you're ready to buy. But there are still a few steps between unwrapping the material and turning your students loose on it.

A WORD ABOUT WORD PROCESSORS

For the English classroom, one of the first items to consider is a word processor. Although not strictly an educational tool, this item may prove to be the single most used—and most useful—piece of educational equipment in your classroom. Here's why.

Most people think word processors are computers. This is only partly correct. Computers should only be called word processors when they have the ability to manipulate text, and to do this they need special software programs called "word processor programs." For this reason, the term "word processor" normally refers to these special pieces of software and not to the computer itself. In this section, any reference to a "word processor" denotes a computer using a word processing program.

Writing with a word processor is much easier than using almost any other method. Passages (anything from a single letter to several long paragraphs) can be added, deleted, and moved around by touching a few keys. This feature makes writing assignments easy, and the final result of your writing efforts can be printed out on "fanfold" (continuous) paper or on ordinary typing or notebook paper.

Any classroom writing assignment can be done on a word processor. The word processor reduces busy work and allows students to concentrate on the mechanics of their writing and on the creative aspects of what they're doing. As a bonus, word processors are ideal for composing tests and assignments—which makes the teachers' job much easier, too.

The first step in shopping for a word processor is to find out which software the manufacturer of your equipment recommends. Then compare. There are several dozen word processors on the market, ranging considerably in price and capabilities.

For a start, don't be intimidated by high costs. A word processor at twice the price of another may satisfy your needs three times as well as a cheaper brand.

On the other hand, higher cost doesn't necessarily guarantee a better package. The price of a word processor is partly a function of its features. More complicated versions cost more than simpler ones, but their extra features may not be of any use to you. The best approach is to decide how you're going to use your word processor and shop for one that does what you want it to do.

The most widely used word processing programs are WordStar (Micro Pro, $495) and Easy Writer (Information Unlimited Software, Inc., $195. An updated version, Easy Writer II, is now available for $350.). There are several other programs on the market, many of which are tailored to specific computer models.

Many pros believe that WordStar is the best word processor on the market. It is complex and has a long list of commands. (Commands are the specific keys you push to make specific changes in the text you're editing.) But WordStar is extremely versatile, and it can perform a remarkable range of "cut and paste" operations.

Although the program's complexity may seem imposing, you don't have to learn all the commands at one time. Learn what you need, and pick up the rest later. This option makes WordStar surprisingly easy to use.

In addition, audio cassettes are available to teach new owners how to use WordStar, as well as many other programs. These tutorial packages can reduce—or even eliminate—"first time" apprehension.

Easy Writer is less complex and less expensive than WordStar but as you might expect, it is also less powerful although its smaller range of functions may not be a serious drawback. The relative simplicity of Easy Writer could make it more convenient for your students to manage, while it will probably do everything you expect from a word processor. If your budget is tight, Easy Writer's $200 price tag could be a real plus.

If you or your students will be using computers for writing assignments, a computer with good word processing support is only the first thing to consider. Next come the hundreds of other programs now on the market—in addition to WordStar and Easy Writer. Others that we consider among the best are Palantier (Designer Software, $450), The Final Word (Mark of the Unicorn, $300), Benchmark 3 (Metasoft Corp., $500) and Word Right (Structured Systems Group, $500). Some of them will work well with your methods; others will not. Again, it's an individual decision that no one else can make for you. In fact, using software someone else has chosen for you just might not improve your curriculum. (New teachers may not understand that statement. Experienced teachers probably will.)

When shopping for a word processing package to meet your specific needs, follow the guidelines given in the accompanying article.

AFTER THE SALE

When the software is safe in your hands, carefully examine the instructions. They will alert you to anything special you need to do. Floppy disks and cassettes are fragile. There are several ways to damage them—and your students will discover each and every one. To get the best results, you'll need to take a few routine precautions. Here is a system I suggest that helps guarantee profitable use of educational software.

1. Make backup copies *(unless, of course, the original is copy protected)* of the program you have purchased. This is standard procedure when using software, but it is especially important if dozens of students will use it.

The package you buy at the store is called a "distribution copy." **NEVER** bring it into class. Make a copy immediately. It's easy to do, and the salesperson who sells you the program can show you how. Then lock the distribution copy away in a safe place. The copy you make is now your "master copy". Set it up so that it's ready to be used in your computer.

Now make more copies (which I call secondary copies), and lock up the master copy. In the classroom, use only the secondary copies. If these are damaged, you can easily replace them by making more copies from your "master". You won't use the distribution copy again unless something terrible happens to the master copy. And you will use the master only to make

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"working" copies. (Of course, if your software is copy protected, you'll have to use the distribution copy in class. In this case, the following precautions are even more important.)

2. Teach students how to take care of software. Fingerprints, a few specks of dust, or a scratch can permanently impair a disk. Cassettes are only slightly less fragile. Although these items cost only a few dollars apiece, you'll want to conserve them.

Be sure your students understand that dropping a disk on the floor *once* can scratch it enough to ruin it. Although disks are fragile, with reasonable care they will be useable for a long time. Once your students understand how to take care of cassettes and disks, your replacement costs should be quite low.

3. Check all copies periodically. Even if they are not mistreated, disks and cassettes can malfunction—sometimes for no apparent reason. If part of a program disappears, you will have to make another copy. But the good news is that you can usually erase the old disk and use it again.

Note: Apparent software malfunctions often turn out to be temporary hardware problems that will quickly clear up by themselves. If you think something has gone wrong with a disk or cassette, *reset the computer and try to use it again*. You should conclude that the software is at fault only if it continues to act up.

Here is one final, but key, hint. Most cities have users' groups that are made up of computer owners who meet regularly to discuss topics of mutual interest and to help each other with computer-related problems. If you anticipate needing help, the local computer store can tell you how to get in touch with the nearest users' group.

Armed with this information, you should be able to select and use some of the vast array of educational software now proliferating on the market. Today's computers are easy to use, and specialized educational software can make them powerful tools in your classroom. Computer applications are limited only by the programs available—and with so much software now available your only problem will be selecting the items that meet your needs.

Educational software!

With careful thought and preparation, the words may become music to the dedicated teacher's ear. □

C. Bruce Hunter is an educator and a freelance writer. *This article was prepared with the assistance of Richard S. Milward, N. Elizabeth Sullivan, and Gena Overby.*